

Module 4: AFM

Basic Module – English

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Affective and emotional dimension and motivation in language learning

TO BEGIN....

Before starting this module, we are going to place ourselves in two specific class situations to demonstrate the importance of the affective and emotional dimension in language classes.

Situation 1. A major clash in English class: Paul's case

In France, 13-year-old Paul is in 4ème (equivalent to year 9 in the UK). The class is made up of around 25 students. Since the start of the year, his English teacher, Laure, has noticed that he is bored in class during the 3 hours of English taught each week. He often refuses to take out his exercise book and, when he does take it out, he draws while the class is doing an oral comprehension activity, when he should be paying attention and participating. He chats to his neighbour, and even with classmates sitting a long way away from him, and he is always looking for excuses to explain why he is chatting (he says he is explaining something to his friend), he moves around, he balances on his chair. The teacher has tried to ask him questions several times, but he was unable to answer as he had not followed what was being said or he would respond saying: *"Sorry, I don't understand any of it"*. Because he switches off from the lesson very quickly, his marks are below average (10 in France, 5 in Spain and Italy). One day, when he is chatting even more frequently and louder than usual, the teacher gives him a warning and separates him from his classmate, but he continues to talk. The teacher tells him calmly but firmly: *"Paul, you need put an end to the continuous chatting, once and for all, because it's not just your classmate beside you that you are disturbing, you're disturbing the whole class, and you're being a nuisance"*.

Paul stands up in anger: *"But why is it always me? Why are you always picking on me? Louis and Sarah are doing the same thing and you never say anything to them. And anyway, I don't care about English, it's pointless. In any case, it's too hard for me - I've tried several times. You haven't even noticed and there are times when I've raised my hand and I've known the answer and you haven't even asked me. You ask me questions when I don't know the answer, and then the others make fun of me and say I have a lousy accent."*

Laure does not tolerate Paul's attitude, which she finds unacceptable, and she takes it very badly. She takes the matter personally and gets angry:

"I can't take any more of your attitude. This just goes to show that you're still acting like a primary school kid. You're selfish and you only think about yourself and not the others. You make me feel exhausted. It's a good thing not everyone in this class is like you. So, as you've been insulting to me, I don't want to see you for the rest of the week. Leave the class and go straight to the school office."

Situation 2. A silent allophone student: Mélissa's case

In France, in the UPE2A¹ class, the reception scheme for non-French-speaking students consists of around 15 students in the middle school (collège). Mélissa has been there for a few months now and attends every morning from Monday to Friday. The rest of the time, i.e. every afternoon, she is included in an ordinary class in 6ème (this is the first year of middle school after primary school). She is 11 and Azerbaijani. She arrived in France with her family 8 months ago with the family having acquired refugee status. She has a previous migration history, having left Azerbaijan, passing through Turkey temporarily on her way to Sweden to reunite with a family member. She began her schooling in Azerbaijan for 3 years between the ages of 6 and 9. She then went to school in Sweden until the end of primary school, i.e. for 1 year. Her family decided to travel to France to seek asylum. Her first language is Azeri, while her other languages are Turkish, Swedish and English. The latter two were her two languages of schooling during her year at school in Sweden. She was a complete beginner in French when she arrived, i.e. she did not have any prior knowledge of French whatsoever.

Since joining the UPE2A scheme, Mélissa does not participate in the lesson and refuses to answer questions posed by her teacher, Yann. When he asks her questions, she avoids his gaze and freezes. Despite everything, the teacher tries to encourage her without too much pressure to reach out to the other students. However, it's no use; whatever he does, even if he comes back to her later, there's no reaction. At the same time, whenever the teacher's attention is no longer on her, she will interact with her classmates in a low voice, either in their first common language or in a shared language. She fidgets in her chair, makes noises, and can be observed repeating words over and over again, but always in a low voice. She occasionally comes to the lesson with a drawing, which she places on the teacher's desk. The drawing often shows her family with a house. But when Yann asks her what is in the drawing, she never wants to talk about it.

Yann feels powerless in the face of this silence, which has persisted since she arrived in the reception scheme 6 months ago.

¹ Pedagogical unit for children arriving in the country whose native language is not French

A space for reflection

For situation 1, Paul's story

After reading these two stories, choose one of the two situations and answer these 3 questions in forum 1.

Answer these three questions for situation 1, Paul's story.

1. As a language teacher, have you ever faced situations like this?
2. Could this conflict situation between Paul and Laure have been avoided?
3. As a language learner, have you experienced similar situations to that experienced by Paul yourself, i.e. have you ever felt completely demotivated in class?

Answer these three questions for situation 2, Mélissa's story.

1. As a language teacher, have you ever faced situations like this?
2. In your opinion, what could have triggered Mélissa's silence?
3. What can be done to bring her out of this silence, which has persisted for 6 months?

The common element in these two specific situations is undoubtedly the affective and emotional insecurity of these two students, which has an impact on their speaking and their attitude in class.

It is important to first clarify certain concepts and ideas in relation to emotions.

Understanding the importance of emotions in language learning

During this exploratory section of the module, we will ask ourselves some specific questions, which we will then attempt to answer.

1. A quick question to begin

We will begin by giving you two examples of what can be said about emotions and what we observe on a daily basis in the media, on television, in social networks, and in films (i.e. in the mainstream).

- In the trailer for the film *Novembre*, directed by Cédric Jimenez and released in 2022, the main character, the commissioner of the counter-terrorism unit in Paris played by Jean Dujardin, tells his team: *“I don’t want us to be led by our personal emotions.”*
- During the game show *Les douze coups de midi* on 20 April 2023, the contestants were asked, *“Why, according to neuroscientists, are the most intelligent people the least unfaithful?”*. The explanation was as follows: *“Intelligent people tend more to apply reason rather than emotion compared to other people.”*

Answer this question via forum 2

In your opinion, what is the problem with what has been said about emotions here?

These examples bear witness to the mistaken and exclusively negative view of emotions that has been held for centuries.

2. Our second question: where does this negative perspective come from?

This perspective dates back to ancient philosophical theories and, in particular, to Plato, who described the battle between “*irrational and impulsive*” emotion and “*rational and deliberative*” reason (Brosch & Sander, 2015). Emotions were thus viewed as a hindrance to good cognitive function with regard, for example, to perception, memory, and decision-making.

This negative view of emotions is subsequently taken up by the Christian religion in the Middle Ages, whereby emotions are likened to urges and passions that must be completely repressed (Reddy, 2018).

The famous 17th century philosopher Descartes also played a key role in establishing an unfavourable view of emotions. He placed a high value on consciousness and the soul, as opposed to emotions, which are portrayed in a very negative light. And, of course, everyone knows his famous quote: “*Cognito, ergo sum; I think, therefore I am.*”

We can therefore legitimately question where this very negative view of emotions comes from. American psychologist and neuroscientist Feldman Barrett (2017) provides a very clear response to this quote: “Because we humans have long believed that rationality makes us special in the animal kingdom. This origin myth reflects one of the most cherished narratives in Western thought, that the human mind is a battlefield where cognition and emotion struggle for control of behavior” (p. 81).

The triune brain theory (MacLean, 1973) further reinforced this devaluing of emotions, but has since been called into question. It also helps us understand why emotions have been presented in such a negative way. The brain was shown as being like an onion consisting of several layers, with a reptilian brain right at the core on the first level, then a second level, a limbic brain - the seat of emotions, and finally, right at the top, dominating the other two: the cortex and neocortex. This brain topography once again refers back to the myth that all of our urges/emotions come from the beast within and it is our cortex, which bears the mark of our superior evolution in relation to the other living beings on Earth, that enables us to control all of this.

However, in recent decades neuroscience has shown that cognition and emotion are entirely linked and interconnected in our brain; there is no level that dominates any other,

everything is interconnected. This discovery has obviously had highly significant consequences for learning (we'll come back to this later).

3. Our third question: how was this crucial neuroscientific discovery made?

The work by Portuguese neuroscientist Damasio (1995) has been decisive in shaping our understanding of emotion. Using the example of the famous patient, Phineas Gage, Damasio effectively showed the interconnectedness of emotion and cognition and the role played by emotions in all decision-making. Phineas Gage (a foreman working on the construction of the American railroad) was the victim of a serious accident in 1848, with an iron rod having damaged the frontal lobes of his brain.

Although, strictly speaking, his cognitive faculties were not affected following the accident and upon waking from his coma, his behaviour had changed completely. He was incapable of making a decision or looking ahead to the future. He was no longer able to form social bonds with others and subsequently sank into alcoholism: *“His behaviour was no longer appropriate and his emotional responses had become unpredictable”* (Gobin et al., 2021, p. 31). Damasio (1995) explains this personality change in Phineas Gage by the fact that emotion and reason are linked in this area of the brain. Feldman Barrett (2017) also states very clearly that, thanks to the work by Damasio (1995), we now know that it is emotions, and what she calls more generally ‘affect’, that guide our day-to-day actions: *“Our new knowledge of brain anatomy now compels us to go one step further. Affect is not just necessary for wisdom: it’s also irrevocably woven into the fabric of every decision”* (p. 80).

So, in place of *“Cognito, ergo sum”*, the famous quote by René Descartes, neurobiologist and neuropsychiatrist Jean-Pierre Vincent (2002) provides this quote: *“Sentio, ergo sum; I think, therefore I am”*.

4. Our fourth question: but what's so special about emotion?

Let's repeat the little experiment suggested by Ulrike Rimmele, a researcher within the neuroscience department at Geneva University. She came to give a lecture at the University of Angers in June 2015 entitled *"The consequence of emotions and stress on learning"*.

She asked everyone to think of a memory of an emotional event: she had used the example of the terrorist attack on the editors of Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015. We could use the Bataclan on 13 November 2015 today or, for those who are older like myself, the attacks on 11 September 2001 in New York.

Answer these three questions via forum 3

1. Where were you?
2. What were you doing?
3. Who first told you about it?

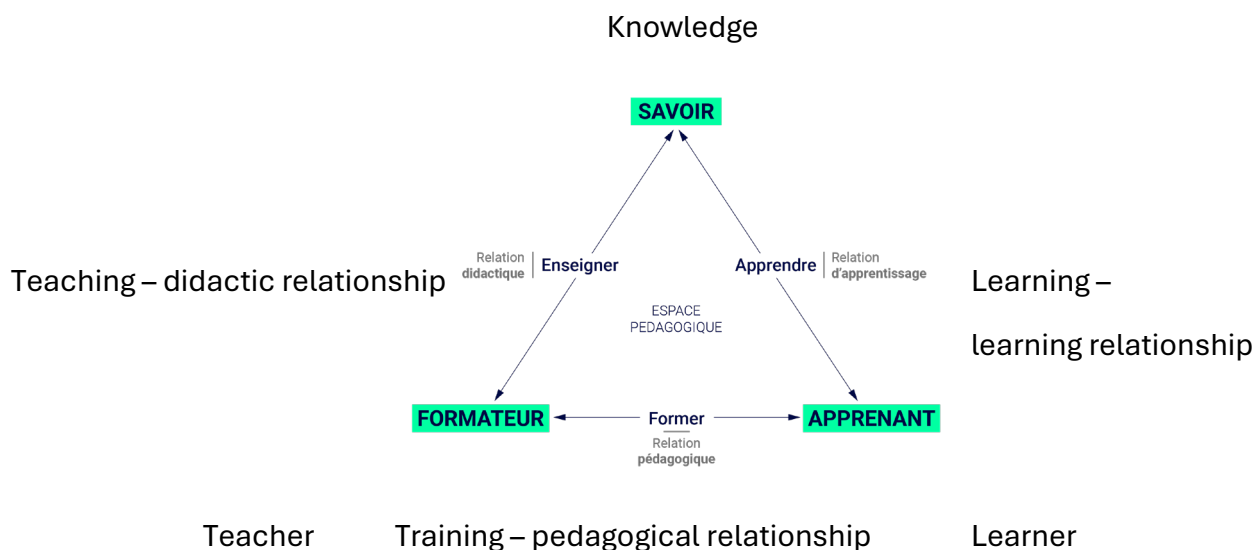
Next, answer these three further questions while thinking about the day before the attack on 11 September 2001, the attack on Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015, or the terrorist attack on the Bataclan on 13 November 2015.

1. Where were you?
2. What were you doing?
3. Who first told you about it?

Normally, when you're attending an event in person and you ask the audience these questions, most of the people present raise their hands for one of the three questions relating to a powerful emotional event. This is not the case regarding the day before the day on which this powerful emotional event took place. A question that can legitimately be asked is: why do we remember such events? The circumstances of this type of event are often remembered in much more detail, as emotions are triggered like a camera in our memory enabling precise images to be stored in the long-term memory. The memories consequently remain etched there. This is not the case for neutral events.

But what is the link between learning and emotion?

5. Our fifth question: but why is it so important to take emotions into account in learning?



Cuisinier and Pons (2011) state that emotions “constitute the hidden side of the didactic triangle linking the teacher, student and knowledge” (p.2). However, school has taken a negative view of emotion for a very long time (and this is still very often the case) in relation to this opposition between emotion and reason (which we discussed in question 2), and, as if it were necessary to pick a side, the school system has chosen reason. As Petiot and Visioli (2022) explain, school in France has always been suspicious of students’ emotions: emotions “associated with play, fun and hedonism” (p. 14). They also state that school in France “is built, to a certain extent, on the denial of emotions that are considered disruptive to the rationality of the minds to be educated” (p. 14). The students know this and are very often unwilling to express their emotions and, more specifically, their vulnerability (Marsollier, 2023).

Returning once again to Feldman Barrett (2017), she explains that the person’s affective state will determine the emotion they experience, and this is what provides the impulse to act, i.e. to do something or not to do something. In other words, this determines their engagement in the task in a school context. Dörnyei (2020) clearly shows the importance of motivation for the accomplishment of any action: “*Motivation theories in general try to*

answer three fundamental questions: why do people decide to do something, how hard are they going to pursue the activity and how long are they willing to sustain it²?” (p. 136).

The emotions that drive the student’s intrinsic motivation are thus very important in the learning of all school subjects. However, this is especially true when it comes to language learning.

² “Motivation theories generally seek to answer three fundamental questions: Why do people decide to do something, how enthusiastically will they pursue the activity, and how long are they willing to sustain it?”
[Free translation]

6. Sixth question: so, why are emotions so important in language learning?

If all school subjects are marked by this emotional environment, language learning seems to be an even more significant vector of emotions and affect.

As Defays 2003 states, cited by Berdal-Masuy, 2021: *“Indeed, learning a foreign language not only involves cognitive activity, intellect (as with mathematics or geography), but also enlists the whole of the learner’s personality”* (p. 318). This characteristic specific to language learning is largely explained by the identity function of language. Language reflects the learner’s identity: we can cite the example of the defence of regional languages, such as Breton, Corsican, Alsatian, etc. in France, or Catalan in Spain.

This identity function performed by language thus determines the attitude that the students adopt in relation to language learning. And, in our study contexts, most of them did not choose it. In fact, it is a non-choice: whether it be the language of schooling in Germany or France for allophone students, as is the case for Mélissa in situation 2 (Mélissa didn't choose France as her country of migration, her parents did), or the first foreign language for students in France, Spain, or Italy (English is imposed on them without really giving them a choice), as is the case for Paul in situation 1.

Furthermore, as Arnold and Brown (1999) explain, the situation of learning a language is inherently stressful and subjects the learner to great emotional vulnerability: *“There are few subjects on the curriculum, perhaps none, that are as likely to cause anxiety as learning foreign languages and second languages”* (Arnold & Brown, 1999, cited by Arnold, 2006, p. 411). Similarly, as Hilton (2022) also highlights: *“When attempting to communicate in L2, the individual may feel as though they are regressing, ridiculous, clumsy or incompetent”* (p. 323). At an emotional level, the situation of learning a language is, in fact, particularly destabilising and is not always associated with positive emotion. This destabilising dimension of the learning situation is even greater when it comes to adolescent learners. As stated by Auger and Le Pichon-Vorstman (2021):

Emotions are at the heart of learning, especially when it comes to learning a new language. This is the case for learning modern languages for all students, from primary school onwards in France, however, this phenomenon also concerns French for a student who has recently arrived. (p. 64)

In our two case studies, you can see that Paul has a problem with how his peers view him in the classroom. He even verbalised this to his teacher. Indeed, he said that he only speaks when he knows the answer and, when Laure asks him a question, he refuses to answer out of fear of being mocked by the others on account his accent.

The same goes for Mélissa, whose silence and refusal to speak in class in front of the other students undoubtedly reflect this anxiety concerning language and the insecurity she feels in the reception scheme.

7. Seventh question: what emotions are we talking about?

We are now going to concentrate on three very important emotions in language learning, beginning with anxiety.

7.1. Anxiety: fear of what others think and loss of self-esteem

Anxiety concerning the inability to understand spoken language is present on two levels.

7.1.1. Anxiety concerning inability to understand spoken language

We are first going to talk about the students' fear regarding spoken language comprehension. We are making this distinction as these two forms of anxiety do not manifest themselves in the same way. The fear of not understanding language is much less visible than anxiety regarding speaking in class. In fact, while the fear of not understanding what the teacher says can have an equally significant impact on successful language learning, it does not expose the student so harshly to the judgement of others.

We return here to the Krashen's hypothesis of the affective filter (1994). It explains that, if a learner feels anxious within a group of speakers of the target language, their language acquisition device cannot process the information to which it is exposed:

If the acquirer is anxious, has low self-esteem, does not consider him/herself to be a potential member of the group that speaks the language, s/he may understand the input, but it will not reach the language acquisition device - a block, the Affective Filter, will keep the input out. (p. 46)

If this hypothesis of the affective filter is revived, the scientific validity of which has been called into question (Piccardo, 2013) in the light of the most recent discoveries in neuroscience concerning the link between the affective and the cognitive in the brain (see module 3 of our training entitled *Learning and teaching languages with the help of neuroscience*), we can consider it confirmed by our research. Affective and emotional security therefore seems essential at this level within the class setting. Similarly, in the affective filter hypothesis, Krashen also describes the *comprehensible input* (1981), which is an essential condition to the affective filter being weak, as Piccardo (2013) states:

“Comprehensible input represents the threshold of significant comprehension beyond which the learner becomes blocked” (p. 24). However, as we have observed through the research projects we conduct with allophone students (Guedat-Bittighoffer & Dat, 2018), in many cases, the students in the ordinary class at middle school are not exposed to an *input* that they are capable of comprehending. These results clearly have significant pedagogical repercussions, as we can see in the case of Mélissa, who does not want to speak within the reception scheme. In connection with the self-determination theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000; 2008) concerning motivation, the essential component of which is the learner’s feeling of competence, it is not difficult to see why many students in language classes find themselves “trapped” in *“the avoidance and demotivation loop”*, to borrow the term used by Hilton (2022, p. 132). Paul and Mélissa are good illustrations of this.

7.1.2. Anxiety regarding speaking

The negative impacts of language anxiety are numerous, with the primary impacts associated with the fear of speaking in class. Speaking in language class is inherently difficult and relates to the student’s willingness to communicate.

Language anxiety is even more pronounced in adolescents in a school context; your students are adolescents between 11 and 16 years of age. The Belgian researcher Jean-Marc Dewaele, who works in London, is the second most cited linguist in the world, and has written dozens of articles on emotion, conducted a study with his daughter Livia Dewaele. They conducted research in 2017 on 189 learners of languages, aged between 12 and 18, and were able to show that the students were concerned about their relative position within the group, with the main source of anxiety being peer judgement. The image that the other students in the class will project onto adolescents is therefore of considerable importance (for children, it is what their parents think that matters).

The fear of appearing foolish in front of their peers prevents students from speaking. Another American researcher, Elaine Horwitz, compares the learners’ anxiety with *“pink dress syndrome”* (2017), i.e. the awareness, on entering a party where everyone is in a dinner jacket or black evening dress, that you are the only one wearing pink. Everyone looks at you and you feel embarrassed. This anxiety, which hinders the *willingness to communicate*, affects progress in languages since, in order to progress, it is important to be able to communicate on a regular basis in the target language, in interactions with classmates. It thus creates a vicious circle within the class.

The second negative emotion that we will study is boredom.

7.2. Boredom: the number 1 enemy of language learning

Boredom, another negative emotion experienced by language learners, is less studied, but has been the subject of studies by Dewaele and Li (2021) in particular, who define boredom as follows: *“Boredom can be defined as an unpleasant affective or psychological state that is associated with low physical and cognitive arousal, specific time perceptions (e.g. dragging or standing still) and action tendencies to disengage from what is going on around. (Li, 2021)”* (p. 6).

Consequently, boredom is more present when tasks are repetitive and too simple for the learner, whereas fatigue occurs when the activities to be carried out are more strenuous on a cognitive level. In addition, boredom seems to have greater impact on willingness to communicate than anxiety, as explained by Li et al. (2022):

This would suggest that boredom is much more lethal than anxiety for Willingness to communicate in classroom Although boredom may also be reflective of individual predispositions such as boredom proneness, it is irrevocably connected to with the nature of learning activities, the topics they cover, and the ways in which they are performed. (p. 14)

In our two case studies, Paul seems to find the lesson too difficult, as he clearly tells Laure during their altercation. He shows all the signs of boredom, agitation in class, chatting, and concentration problems.

Similarly, Mélissa seems to be bored with Yann, as she shows signs of agitation when Yann has his back turned. As such, both of these students show very clear signs of boredom in language class.

Now that we have discussed two negative emotions, let's discuss a positive emotion that plays a key role in language learning.

7.3. Enjoyment on the path towards flow: a look at positive emotions

As Dewaele et al. (2019) explain, positive psychology truly announced its arrival in the field of language acquisition with the publication of the article by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012). The fields of research in education in general and, more specifically, in languages have long focused on negative emotions, as it is these “*that cause pathologies*” (Petiot and Visioli, 2022). However, as Dewaele and MacIntyre (2022) maintain: “*Instead of primarily focusing on factors that slowed growth (anxiety), interest grew in the role of positive emotions (enjoyment, pride, love, flow) and positive learner characteristics such as emotional intelligence, well-being, optimism, hope, and flow states*” (p. 158). The publication of Csikszentmihalyi’s book, *Flow: The Psychology of optimal experience* (1990), has made it possible to define an ideal state in which the school should immerse students during their learning. According to its creator, nine conditions must be met to achieve this state of flow:

... a balance between challenge and skill, concentration on the task, a clear objective, clear and precise feedback, an absence of distractions, control over the action, and absence of preoccupation with ego, an altered notion of time and an experience of well-being provided by the task. (Petiot & Visioli, 2022, p. 80)

Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) then developed the concept of *enjoyment in reference to flow*. *Enjoyment* describes a state of intense and profound joy, but which requires effort on a cognitive level; the student should be active (and thus intrinsically motivated by the task to be accomplished). A student who achieves a high degree of *enjoyment* enters a fleeting state of *flow*.

We also distinguish between three types of enjoyment:

- *teacher enjoyment* (appreciation of the English teacher by the students);
- *social enjoyment* (understanding between the peers in the class);
- *personal enjoyment* (self-esteem in relation to what I produce in the language).

If we return to our two students, Paul and Mélissa, it seems that they do not experience any enjoyment in the language class, and therefore have no positive emotions, which is highly problematic and prevents them from being motivated and engaged in learning the target language.

In conclusion....

Your personal reflection

The affective and emotional dimension must be taken into account in language learning. Think about what you have learned by answering the following three questions via forum 4:

1. Were you familiar with everything that was presented in the explanatory section of module 4? And, if so, when did you have access to these elements?
2. Is there anything that you have read that has made an impression on you? Did this affect you negatively or positively? Why?
3. What practical solutions can you come up with for Paul and Mélissa, to reduce their anxiety in language class?

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